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Spring Rites on the Farm

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Spring on the farm began in March. This was the month of thawing and freezing, of mud and frozen ruts. When the frost went out of the ground the feed yards seemed to have no bottom. Father's young bulls, old enough for service and for sale, were held in a pen near the silo. Every night and morning we fed them. We scooped silage into bushel and a half baskets, hoisted them on our shoulders and waded out to the feed bunks. The mud reached half way to the top of our rubber boots and each step required careful balance and a strong pull. Once my boot was so mud-bound that I stepped out of it and plunged my foot clad in a white sock deep in the mud.

We balanced and stepped with extra caution because 12 or 14 horned yearling Shorthorn bulls crowded against us. The galvanized iron baskets with rope handles bore down heavy on our shoulders. The hungry playful bulls blocked our way and it took strength and courage to reach the feed bunk. Many a time I banged an empty basket against some shoving greedy head to clear a path for a return to the silo.

Our cross road became a swamp of mud and melting snow. Sometimes the main road was little better. Once going home from the annual school meeting, we backed up all the way home because the ruts were so deep we could not turn the car around. Sometimes after a thaw, a sharp freeze would turn roads and feed yards into badlands of cement. When a thaw came too early we worried about the spring seeding and the fruit trees. The early thaw would surely be followed by a hard freeze. The warm days would start the sap to rise in the trees, then the freeze would burst the cambian layer under the bark and kill the trees. Out in the fields if the alfalfa began to grow, the freeze would boost the tops of the plant, break it loose from the root. Those alfalfa crowns roosting on top of the ground looked like a flock of crows sitting in the field. If there were many "crows" the field would not produce a hay crop and some substitute crop took the place of the alfalfa. Sometimes we plowed it and planted corn, or disced it heavily and planted a forage crop such as sudan grass or oats which we cut green for hay.

We waded around in our rubber boots and quoted Mark Twain's saying that anyone who lived through

March could get through the rest of the year. Now with black-topped roads, cement feed yards, automatic bunk feeders, this past seems a trick of the imagination.

Sometimes March broke the pattern. Sun warmed air, wind almost no more than a draft from the southwest, dry solid ground except for a few frost boils, and we wore no rubber boots or mudstained overalls. Everything would seem easy, we finished the chores without a struggle. In the days before trucks hauled livestock, we drove our fat cattle on foot to the railroad stockyards. Here we loaded them into cars to be shipped to Chicago. On one such March day we drove a load of fat heifers to town and lost one from the heat.

But rain or shine, warm or cold, certain tasks demanded attention when their time came. We moved the fanning mill into the granary to clean the seed oats. We shovelled oats into the hopper, someone turned the crank, the grain sifted down through screens which sorted them according to size. The large heavy kernels that we wanted for seed fell into a box at the bottom which we emptied into sacks. The smaller kernels dribbled out of a spout into a basket. But the main feature of the mill was a large wooden-bladed fan which revolved at high speed and blew out the dust, chaff, and lightweight kernels into a pile. It was well named, it fanned the oats.

If a fungus or wilt had infected the oats the year before we poured an arsenical compound into the hopper to dust the oats. In spite of the masks we wore, we went around a few days afterward with a headache and a bad taste in our mouths.

We used an endgate seeder to sow the oats. A large hopper fed grain into two propellers whirling in opposite directions; these propellers broadcast the grain over a distance of nine corn rows. The seeder hung from the endgate of a cart with two large wheels. A chain running over a sprocket attached to one of the wheels furnished the power. A small hopper attached to the big one held the grass seed for our hay crop next year, either a mixture of timothy, red clover and alsike clover, or alfalfa seed. A team of horses pulled the cart, a team that could be depended on to follow a corn row while Father shovelled oats and grass seed into the hoppers. We hoped for a windless day so the seed would spread evenly.

We practiced a standard rotation of crops. After a field had raised corn for two years, it received a "rest" by raising a crop of oats one year and hay the next. After the hay was taken off, we pastured the aftermath and then usually plowed it before winter, ready for a crop of corn the next year. These days no one bothers with a rotation of crops. Instead of building up the soil with crop residues and manure, farmers use artificial fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides and keep the same field in corn year after year.

I wonder if this is not a mistake. Our mother earth needs to be cared for and stuffing her with chemicals does not seem to me to be the way to keep or make her fertile and fruitful.

After the seed was broadcast we disced it lightly and harrowed it to be sure it was planted and covered. The ideal situation was to have a wet two-inch snow right after seeding. As the snow melted it pulled the seeds into the ground. For a while we used a grain drill. This is a machine that plants the seed by dropping it through long tubes into little furrows about an inch deep. A chain dragged behind

each furrow covers the seed. The wind won't drift the seed but a drill covers less ground than an endgate seeder.

We turned the ground over with a moldboard plow before we planted corn. Fields that had been in corn the year before lay covered with stalks. Our horse-drawn discs were too light to cut up the corn stalks and the stalks plugged the plows. It brings out bad language when a plow needs to stop every ten rods or so to unload the cornstalks that clog the plow beam.

Father concocted a device to clear the ground before plowing. On a frosty morning when the stalks would break off easily, he would drag a length of railroad rail across the field. With a team at each end, he hauled that rail across the corn rows and snapped loose the stalks from their roots. A hired man, or one of us boys, followed with a dump rake and piled the stalks in long windrows. At night after chores we would go out and burn them. It was exciting. We ran from row to row with a flaming brand made of gunny sacks wired to a broom handle and soaked in kerosense. Father had a kerosene torch, made so that when you blew in the hollow handle, flames would shoot into the air. He had carried it in a Rough Rider parade when Teddy Roosevelt was running for President.

This time of burning was one of the great evenings of the year. We ran from windrow to windrow, waving our torches, whooping like Indians. When it ended, tired, smoke-stained, sometimes with an overall leg burned, eyebrows singed, we crept home. We washed the soot from hands and faces and fell into bed. It was a kind of Walpurgis Night while it lasted and we played the part of demons.

Now we know what an acre of cornstalks is worth as fertilizer. Farmers chop them with a stalk cutter and plow them under. Or bale them for bedding and haul them out as manure. We return something of what we owe the land. But in those times, the stalks just tangled in the plows and we burned them.

Nature needs moisture to make seeds grow. This is true in the seeds of people and animals. But it amazed me to find shelled corn in the bin, heating and giving off moisture when planting time came. We watched it lest it mold and decay. If we planned to keep the corn we shovelled it from one bin to another to let the air dry it. This was a good rainy day job for us boys. Or else we sold it or took care that it was all fed before, say, April 15th.

Father liked to begin planting corn on the 10th of May and to be finished by the 20th. Though the weather did not always cooperate, he usually finished before the month was finished. He used a two-row planter set for rows forty-two inches wide and a check wire with knots forty-two inches apart. The wire ran through a fork arrangement on the machine, the knots tripped the fork and a hill of corn fell into the ground. A hill had two, three, four kernels—however, the machine was set to let the kernels fall into the furrow opened by the planter shoe. The wire extended from one end of the field to another and was held by stakes pushed into the ground.

Each time the planter turned at the end of the field, the stake had to be pulled up and re-set behind the planter to keep the wire beside the machine. The purpose of this knotted wire was to make straight rows crosswise as well as lengthwise. Thus the corn could be cultivated both ways and root out any grass or weeds that sneaked into the row. Today herbicides take care of most of the weeds. I

doubt that many young farmers ever heard of a check wire. With a tractor-mounted cultivator they make one pass through the field and that ends it.

Father had a team of half-Morgan mares, both bay, long-legged, small heads, tough and willing workers. They took a long stride and on a good day Father could plant twenty acres of corn. No one in the neighborhood could match this. Besides the actual planting, the driving back and forth from one end to the other, at each end Father had to jump off the planter, pull up the stake with the check wire, set it behind the planter, drive it into the ground, fit the wire into the fork, and snap it in place. Then he swung the marker over to the new ground side. The last horse-drawn planter we bought had a marker on each side and as the planter turned one marker went down and the other raised. The marvels of automation. The marker was a rolling disc at the end of a long arm that dug a little furrow in the earth so that the driver could straddle it the next round and keep the right distance from the rows just planted. Also, at one end of the field Father had to fill the planter boxes with seed corn.

My job, as soon as I was old enough to handle a four-horse team, was to harrow ("drag" we called it) the ground Father had planted. This, I was told, was to smooth out the planter tracks so that the next rain would not make a ditch of them and wash out the corn. At the time it seemed just a job to keep boys busy. But all the neighbors did it too, so it must have been part of the ritual of spring work.

In the house another spring ritual took place. Mother had two 250-egg incubators in which to hatch our flock of chickens. The eggs were sorted, to get the clean ones with clean, uncracked shells. Next the incubators were scrubbed with boiling water to which was added a few drops of carbolic acid. Kerosene lamps kept the eggs warm and they had to be cleaned, wicks trimmed and filled with oil. The eggs lay in trays which we scrubbed and dried. The lamps burned about a week in the empty incubators to see if the temperature rose to the right degree and held there. Here Mother ruled and her word was law.

Next we cleaned the chicken coops to be ready for the baby chicks. Again boiling water, carbolic acid, and stiff brushes cleaned floors and sides.

These small coops had been built by a carpenter under Mother's direction. They had slats across the front so that the baby chicks could run in and out, but they barred the way for any inquisitive fowl.

We children disliked these chores. Chickens to us seemed stupid, smelly, and difficult to raise; the only good chicken came on a platter for Sunday dinner.

Mother tended the incubator. She turned the eggs every third day by hauling out the trays, placing a spare tray on top and turning over the whole shebang. The lamps heated water which circulated under the trays and kept the temperature even. These were the days when we walked and spoke quietly around Mother.

It excited all of us when the chickens began to hatch. We could peek through the glass doors and see them struggling out of their shells. The incubator seemed crowded with balls of fluff on toothpick legs, cheeping in a never-ending chorus. Mother put them in the coops under old setting hens. We filled the water cups and feed dishes and marvelled at how soon

feathers formed. It seemed only days before the chicks began to look like chickens, no longer little balls of fluff.

Then began the watchful guard. Every night the coops were closed to keep out rats, weasels, skunks, even cats that had gone wild. In the daytime the sky held danger from hawks and crows. More than once I have seen Father run for the shotgun when some sky marauder had set the old hens fussing and clucking. Once when I was older and a crow dropped down, killed a chick and began to eat it, I shot the marauder right through the kitchen window. It meant new glass for the window but that crow had cawed its last caw.

Crows show great powers of self-preservation. Who shoots a crow must get up early in the morning. I saw crows harrass a young jack rabbit which took refuge under wild grapevines along the fence. When I hung the shotgun on the tractor fender after dinner, nary a crow did I see. A sentinel must have spotted the gun and passed the word along.

After the chicks were removed we cleaned the incubators for a second hatch. The infertile eggs, rotten now, we hauled to the field and buried. Once, moved by who knows what deviltry, we played baseball with the rotten eggs.

Our cousin, James McAlvin, was visiting us and it may have been his idea. We found a piece of board, whittled a kind of handle for it, then one of us took the pitcher's stance and lobbed an egg to the batter. We took turns batting, four of us. The eggs made a wonderful *splat!* when the bat hit them. We found it a most satisfying game. With a wide board bat the batter seldom missed. If the pitcher gripped the egg too hard it broke in his hand but there was always another egg. When, weary at last and with all the eggs smashed, we returned to the house, the putrid smell on our clothes preceded us and I can still see Mother's wrinkled nose when she smelled us coming.

But since it was a warm May day, we took clean clothes and went to the cattle tank behind the corncribs, stripped off, and washed ourselves and our clothes. I suppose that Mother put them through the washing machine again but we washed off most of the egg and shell. It was a glorious wallow in filth.

The miracles of spring on the farm revealed themselves almost daily as if life itself spoke. Perhaps it does. We shouted our discoveries of a new litter of kittens in the haymow, a hatful of baby chicks hatched out in the raspberry patch by some old biddy that had stolen a nest. We kept our distance from the fierce turkey hen and her flock of cheeping babies. We scratched the necks of colts and felt them nibble our shoulders in return. We romped with calves if the mother cow was confined to a stall. We chased little pigs out of the garden, small invaders that always found a hole in the fence.

It was pleasure. The dirt, manure, and blood all seemed part of it. We scraped out chicken houses, cleaned calf pens, carried bedding, mixed slop for the pigs. These chores belong to a farm and we accepted them as part of the day's work. We threw the little pigs that died in the manure spreader, buried dead chickens, hauled a dead calf out to the field for the crows to plunder.

Death seemed natural, every thing that lives must die. We grieved deeply of course for the death of a pet kitten, an old dog, a favorite horse. But we did not cry out against it nor accuse

God of robbing us. On a farm death stands a close companion to birth. I remember a pile of bones in a swale between two fields near the end of the farm. No doubt the carcass of some horse or cow had been dragged and left to go back to the elements. Now the Rendering Works comes and collects dead animals and bone piles, and burial mounds no longer show in the fields.

But birth aroused our enthusiasm, some new thing, another life brought into being. I squatted with my father in the hoghouse, beside a lantern on cold Spring nights to help a sow deliver her burden of pigs. We boys set the alarm clock for two-hour intervals to check on a mare ready to foal. We looped a rope around the legs of a calf protruding from its mother and pulled in time with her rhythm to bring the calf safely to birth. I have seen my mother assist a chick from its shell. We stripped the placenta from the noses of colts and calves so that they could breathe. We knew that all young colts have curly tails and a calf could be led into a pen by letting it suck your finger.

We hoed and weeded the garden, mowed the lawn, cut weeds in the fence row. We made a tennis court on the lawn by leaving a strip of grass where the lines would be. We cultivated corn, ran a rotary hoe over the soybeans, fixed fence on rainy days. Sometimes we tore out an old fence and put in a new one of woven wire to make the field hog-tight. Then it was time to make hay, shock the oats, and get ready for threshing.

Once winter ends the hands of the seasons push the work against the farmer's shoulders until the last furrow is turned, the last ear of corn gathered and stored. Time does not count in hours and days but in the appointed time for each farm task.

The rhythm of work seems to pick up speed as the crops ripen and the farmer becomes a prisoner of the seasons. He is locked into the needs of each task and finds himself both the victim and favorite of the weather. Perhaps his chances with the weather is the greatest gamble of all. The difficulty of trying to run a cornhusker or a combine through a field that the rains have made a sea of mud is beyond description. But harvesting must be done when the harvest time comes.

A tractor will bury itself in the mud without a qualm. More than once our wide-tread tractor has gone to pull out some neighbor's machine from its soggy bed. Even in the days of horses, in a wet season, we used a "jerk team" in the oatfield to help move wagons of bundles to the threshing machine. The season's imperatives give us no rest.

The days come and go linked to a chain of events. The seed found its place and grew or it did not grow. The time to plant corn is at cornplanting time. No promise of a good season comforts the farmer because he does not believe it. He knows too much rain may fall, or drought wilt his crops, or hail bring its hammers of catastrophe. He knows lightning may kill his cows, burn his barn, split the big elm tree at the corner of the yard. But he plods on as if he expected to harvest his expectations.

Spring pushes him to field, stall, pen, garden as he brings into existence something that was not there before. But seed cannot wait, earth must be turned, the weather may give him success or failure. The land waits on his performance and he makes his way as best he can against whatever odds appear. If the harvest he sees in his mind's eye fails him, there is always

another year and he will try again. One of our neighbors shipped a load of steers to Chicago and we asked him if the price he received pleased him. "Well," he said, "I got about what I expected but not as much as I hoped."

No one needs to fart in church to be embarrassed, just match his puny efforts of creation against the urgency of life. Whoever dares to direct the ways of living things has his work cut out for him.

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